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A Pick 'n' Mix Programme Can Be An Incoherent One

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A Pick 'n' Mix Programme Can Be An Incoherent One

Abstract

Moocs and student choice are welcome, but traditional courses offer proven pathways to the summit of knowledge, argues Alan Ruby.

Keywords

moocs, education

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Coursera, the for-profit massive open online course platform, sent out a quarterly update recently. It now offers 1,026 courses through 119 partners. There are 25 categories: the biggest is the humanities with 186 courses. Just over a quarter of the courses (268) offer “verified certification” and 110 are a set of courses intended to deepen subject expertise. But most courses are discrete units of content, including the popular social psychology Mooc from [Wesleyan University](#) and the “learner recommended” [University of Rochester](#) course “The Music of the Rolling Stones 1962-74”.

Running my eye down the list, I was reminded that by the mid 1980s US high schools had become so large and the curricula so diffuse that researchers Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar and David K. Cohen said that they resembled “shopping malls” (in their book, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*, 1985). The mall high schools offered various opportunities to learn. There was a lot of choice in terms of field, quality and pathways: pre-college, pre-vocational, life skills.

However, this approach did not work out so well. The lack of a common curriculum, marked variation in public expenditure across districts and the lack of uniform high school completion standards confounded employers and universities trying to make selection decisions. Students seeking their first job were less well served by qualifications with little national currency or comparability. Inequities shaped by race, income and location were increased.

Business, community and teaching union leaders campaigned for “common core standards”. Thirty years later, those standards are in place in many states. A young person who has followed a programme grounded in the common core standards will have had a planned educational experience where concepts, principles and ideas will have been presented in a logical order and sequence, in ways likely to facilitate learning.

Mooc providers and advocates of “unbundling” the university degree are not concerned with the formation of a set of competencies or the array of skills and knowledge that constitute a well-rounded education or prepare students for “lives...beyond college”, as envisaged by [Harvard University](#)’s programme of general education. Nor are they interested in credentials mediated through an assessment or accreditation agency or aligned to a national qualification framework that allows for occupational mobility and free movement of labour between employers.

Instead, they offer badges of completion, symbols of time served, or student assessment by peers. The last of these can be a good measure of learning when moderated and supported by formal rubrics. Or peer assessment can be an aggregation of informed and less informed judgements, such as dining reviews on Yelp or other crowdsourced sites.

Individual choice is a great motivator and an important individual freedom, but it does not always support healthy development. There are known and effective pathways to the acquisition of deep knowledge in many disciplines. This is evident in Coursera offerings such as [Johns Hopkins University](#)’s sequence of nine courses in data science with two prerequisites and a culminating investigate project.

Failing to offer some guidance to learners about logical and proven sequences of learning is irresponsible and potentially wasteful. The shopping mall university is no panacea for the challenge of extending access to all those with the ability and aptitude for higher education.